

Shame

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [December 27, 2011](#) issue

You might assume that an NC-17 movie about sex addiction starring the striking Michael Fassbender and featuring rampant nudity and graphic depictions of various sex acts would have a certain erotic allure. You would be wrong. *Shame* is a painfully sad tale of a man lost in a world of one-night stands, anonymous hookups, visits from prostitutes, pornography chat rooms and public bathroom stalls where frantic masturbation is as common as going outside to catch a smoke.

The addict in question, Brandon (Fassbender), is a successful businessman living in a sleek, soulless Manhattan apartment. His only mission in life seems to be discovering his next orgasm. To that end, he eyes girls on the subway, hangs out in bars both seedy and chic and looks to score quickly so he can move on to the next sexual event. The majority of the first act examines how Brandon juggles his dangerous addiction with a full-time job.

The film shifts from quasi-documentary to domestic drama with the arrival of Brandon's sister, Sissy (Carey Mulligan), a lounge singer whose pathetic desire for love, both romantic and fraternal, is as intense as Brandon's rejection of intimacy. Broke and out of work, she pleads with Brandon to allow her to stay with him until she gets her bearings. He unhappily agrees, which sets up the central conflict of the movie.

While it seems obvious from their actions and interactions that Brandon and Sissy had rough childhoods, writer-director Steve McQueen (*Hunger*) and co-writer Abi Morgan scrupulously avoid providing specifics. We are left to fill in the blanks based on the occasional glance, grimace or smile of recognition. This approach not only makes us wonder what sorts of abuse led them down their self-destructive paths, but it forces us to imagine the worst about their own complicated relationship.

Even more heartbreaking are a few scenes that suggest what these two siblings could be like under different circumstances. ("We're not bad people," Sissy says at one point. "We just come from a bad place.") In the case of Brandon, that possibility appears in a sequence in which a burgeoning dating relationship is sabotaged by his

addiction. For Sissy, it emerges in her tender and revealing rendition of "New York, New York" at a supper club, where her desperate longing for some sort of connection is stripped bare.

What makes *Shame* so fascinating as a study of addiction is that, unlike drugs or alcohol or any number of other obsessions that must be conquered or controlled, sex can and should be inextricably tied to love. The inability to control the one almost certainly rules out the possibility of embracing the other, which may be the saddest result of all.